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SUBJECT: LEBANON: AMBASSADOR RECEIVES OVERVIEW OF GOL'S PALESTINIAN REFUGEE ASSISTANCE EFFORTS

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

¶1. (C) During an introductory call on February 13, the Ambassador received an overview of the GOL's programs to assist the Palestinian refugee community from Ambassador Khalil Makkawi, President of the Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee (LPDC). Ambassador Makkawi outlined short-term goals, which focus on the rapid reconstruction of the Nahr al-Barid (NAB) refugee camp. He also said that there remains an urgent need to assist the Lebanese citizens of Tripoli whose homes and livelihoods were damaged during the Summer 2007 armed conflict between the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and the Fatah al Islam (FAI) militants.

¶2. (C) Turning to long-term goals, Ambassador Makkawi emphasized the need to improve "sub-human living conditions" in all of Lebanon's camps, which he agrees have become breeding grounds for extremist elements. He said that the GOL is determined to retain security control over NAB when reconstruction is complete and he wants all camps to return to the "sovereign control" of the GOL. He expressed a desire to continue working for expanded employment rights for the Palestinians. However, this will require an act of Parliament, which is impossible under the current political stalemate. Finally, he shared with a success story. He has worked closely with UNRWA and resident PLO representatives to provide identification paperwork (although not refugee status or citizenship) to the formally stateless refugees who arrived in the 1970's. End Summary

PM Endorses Plan to Rebuild NAB

¶3. (C) On February 12, Prime Minister Siniora, in a press conference also attended by UNRWA Secretary General Karen Abu Zayd and PLO Representative for Lebanon Abbas Zaki, announced the GOL's adoption of a plan to rebuild NAB. (Note: The GOL's endorsement of this plan represents a major achievement for UNRWA, which had to deal with contentious and conflicting demands from Lebanese security services, Tripoli-area municipal leaders and Palestinian refugee representatives. End Note.) Ambassador Makkawi said that the GOL was now waiting for the completion of a World Bank damage assessment for the residential and commercial areas surrounding the camp in Tripoli.

¶4. (C) With the two proposals in hand, the GOL will organize a combined appeal to international donors similar to the one

hosted by Prime Minister Siniora in September 2007. Makkawi estimates that reconstruction of the old camp will cost a total of USD 174 million. The figures for reconstruction of the new camp and reparation of the surrounding areas are still pending. While stressing that this is not confirmed, Makkawi estimated that the GOL will present international donors with an appeal totaling USD 200 - 250 million. The GOL will express a preference for donations to be centralized in a World Bank trust fund, but stressed that the GOL is willing to work with donors individually to find a funding mechanism which will best suit their needs. "The important thing is that we get the work done." When asked for the projected date for the next conference, Makkawi said it would be soon but he could not commit to a specific time frame.

¶15. (C) Makkawi sense of urgency echoed the Prime Minister's, who told the Ambassador and a visiting delegation on February 12 that the rapid and successful reconstruction of the NAB camp was a matter of national security for Lebanon (septel). The camps in Lebanon are currently a breeding ground for extremists and NAB can become a new model for change and hope among the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon.

#### Refugees Live in Sub-Human Conditions

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¶16. (C) The Ambassador asked Makkawi for an assessment of the mood in the refugee camps throughout Lebanon. Makkawi said there were not drastic differences between the camps and the mood was universally grim. He spoke of his first personal visit to the camps upon the start of his current job. He said he was physically sick to his stomach to see the sub-human conditions that people had been living in for decades. According to Makkawi, people are miserable and there is very little hope for a better future. Given the

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estimated population of 400,000 refugees, this is an issue that must be addressed, Makkawi told us.

¶17. (C) However, Makkawi is firm in his belief that improvements must be made only if the Palestinian refugees act like partners. He said there is no room for negotiation on the issue of arms in the refugee camps. The GOL is determined to maintain security control over its own sovereign territory.

#### Long-Term Efforts to Improve Quality of Life

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¶18. (C) Makkawi often speaks with regret about the work the LPDC was engaged in before security and political emergencies intervened. He was proud to note that, in 2006, Palestinian refugees were given the right to work in 60-70 different labor categories. While admitting that these are mostly unskilled jobs, he said that this had been a major breakthrough and allowed some refugees to begin to financially support their own families. The refugees are still advocating for permission to participate in more highly-skilled professions, such as engineering and pharmacy work. There are two problems with this, according to Makkawi. First, it may be met with resistance by Lebanese citizens given the current high levels of unemployment in the country. Makkawi said that the opposition is particularly opposed to these measures which may improve the lot of the Palestinian Sunni Muslims while negatively impacting Shia workers who would face higher competition for limited employment opportunities. Secondly, these changes require a parliamentary amendment to existing labor laws. As the Lebanese parliament has not met in more than 16 months, it is unlikely that this issue will be solved in the near future.

¶19. (C) Makkawi was also proud of his efforts to provide identification papers to a number of Palestinian refugees who had been considered stateless for decades. The GOL had given formal refugee status to Palestinians who entered Lebanon in

1948 and the descendants of this group. However, a second wave of refugees entered Lebanon in the 1970's with identification papers from Egypt and Jordan which soon expired. This second group of refugees, estimated to be between 3,000 - 5,000, had been without papers for decades and were frequently detained by Lebanese security agencies when they left the camps. Makkawi, working closely with UNRWA and the PLO office, has issued identification papers to this group which states that they are Palestinian, although they were given neither refugee status nor Lebanese citizenship. However, at least with these papers, refugees are able to leave the camps without fear of arrest, able to get married and participate in other civil or educational events which require id papers for registration purposes. This process is on-going, but Makkawi is pleased with the success to date.

Look Forward to Working Closely with the U.S.

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¶10. (C) The Ambassador stressed that the upcoming visit of Samuel Witten, Acting A/S of State for Population, Migration and Refugee Issues, was a sign of the U.S.'s continued commitment to this issue. As the largest contributor (USD 10 million) during the September 2007 conference for Nahr al-Barid reconstruction, the Ambassador said that the U.S. looks forward to reviewing the upcoming reports from UNRWA and the World Bank to explore additional opportunities for cooperation.

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